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SUBJECT: ALLAN BOESAK JOINS COPE

REFTEL: PRETORIA 02736

¶1. (U) On December 16, former anti-apartheid cleric Allan Boesak joined the Congress of the People (COPE) at its founding conference in Bloemfontein. Boesak, who was at the forefront of peaceful resistance to apartheid, has had a colorful career. He first rose to prominence in the 1980's as a cleric and a leader of the anti-apartheid United Democratic Front. In 1982, Boesak persuaded members of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to declare apartheid a heresy and to suspend membership of the white South African churches. He served as president of the Alliance from 1982 to 1991. In 1983, Boesak helped organize the United Democratic Front (UDF), a multiracial association of groups opposed to apartheid, and in 1984 he and others organized a boycott of the national elections. Boesak was arrested a number of times for his participation in demonstrations, and his movements and speech were restricted.

¶2. (U) After the fall of apartheid in the early 1990s, Boesak became active in the ANC and was appointed leader of the ANC in the Western Cape. At this time he started the Foundation for Peace and Justice (FPJ), an organization designed to help victims of apartheid. He raised funds for his foundation from the Swedish International Development Agency, Denmark's Dan Church Aid and the Church of Norway. In 1994, he was accused of misappropriating money donated to the charity. The allegations forced SA to withdraw his nomination as ambassador to the United Nations. In 1999, Boesak was found guilty of stealing more than R1.5 million from the FPJ and was sentenced to six years in prison, despite the ANC conducting its own enquiry which cleared him. He was released on parole in 2001 after serving only two years of his sentence.

¶3. (U) After being released from prison, Boesak continued to enjoy considerable support from the ANC of which he remained a member. The late Justice Minister, Dullah Omar, once gave him a hero's welcome and dismissed his offence as "struggle accounting" done in the name of the liberation movement. In 2005, South African President Thabo Mbeki pardoned Boesak, a move which some political parties called a travesty of justice and led to speculation that the pardon was purely politically motivated.

¶4. (U) By July 2008, Boesak had fallen out with the ANC. He accused the party of entrenching racial hatred instead of preaching tolerance. In a public address in Cape Town, he said the party had brought back the hated system of racial categorization and said affirmative action had, in some cases, taken on new forms of racial exclusion, throwing overboard the solidarity forged through years of struggle.

¶5. (U) Comment: Boesak's emergence as a member of Cope has resulted in a mud-slinging match between the ANC and Cope. The ANC has labeled Boesak a has-been who tried to sell his services to the highest bidder, while Cope has stated that such conduct was not unexpected from the ANC. Boesak enjoys a large following among the colored people in the Western Cape and if Cope wishes to make inroads into this community it must have a representative with whom the people can identify. Cope must however, guard against being labeled as a party where outcasts from other political parties are welcomed. It remains to be seen whether Boesak's controversial past will have a negative impact on the newly formed party. End comment.